

Gloria!
 Luke 2:8-14
 Psalm 148
 Advent III December 17, 2017

(Please turn to hymn 113; we will sing the first verse. And keep your finger in the page.)by

On this third Sunday of Advent, we come to the third of Luke's canticles, the shortest of the four, the only one not sung by humans.

This is the angels' message:

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward people.

That's the King James translation and, except for the reference to "men" rather than the expansive "people" this captures the intent of the writer. It's God's good will that extends peace in its fullness, not some characteristic of humans which invites the divine peace on deserving individuals.

Why? Why does Luke give us this song?

There is a political reason: Barb Schreur, in her contribution to the Advent Devotional just this morning, tells that archeologists have found an inscription on a stone monument in western Turkey. It celebrates the glorious reign of Caesar Augustus reading "Behold," "the good tidings for the world. Unto us has come a savior, Caesar, for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things. With the angel's son, Luke is saying just a minute. It's not Caesar Augustus who brings the world peace and for whom we should be praising, it's Jesus!

There is also a sociological reason. In ancient Palestine, the birth of a child was an exciting and important time in a village. With the mother in labor, the anxious father would leave his home and wait in the garden of a friend who stays by the home of the expectant couple. If the infant is a boy, he runs to the father in great glee shouting ***Bschara, Baschara*** or "good tidings, good tidings" (Village life in

Palestine on line book). If it's a girl, the messenger takes his time delivering the not quite so happy news. William Barclay writes that upon hearing that a boy child has been born, the village musicians would gather near the house and break into music and singing soon to be joined by all the village. If a child was a girl, the musicians went silently and regretfully away!

As Luke tells the story, with Mary and Joseph away from their home village in Bethlehem, there would have been no buddy to wait with Joseph, no announcement from a friend, no village musicians to serenade the parents and child. Luke inserts the announcing angel saying “***bashara***” “good tidings of great joy for all people” birth announcement followed by a “village” of celebrative, praising angels. Barclay comments that “It is a lovely thought that the minstrelsy of heaven took the place of the minstrels of earth and angels sang the songs for Jesus that it was impossible for the earthly singers to sing”.

Sing Gloria

I talked with my Orthodox friend Carolyn yesterday and we laughed about how Protestants (she had been Baptist) don't spend much time with angels, in contrast to the Orthodox traditions where angels are everywhere, in icons, in prayers, in songs. She reminded me that that the 4th century Council of Laodicea affirmed veneration of angels, but condemned their worship. (Neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox Churches worship angels.)About a century later, the mystical theologian, Dionysius the Areopagite, proposed from his reading of both Jewish and Christian writings, a hierarchy or ordering or "choirs" of angels. In the top third, closest to the Divine Presence, are

The seraphim who stand closest to God and blaze with flaming fire with love for God and kindle such love in others;

The cherubim who stand behind the seraphim, radiant with the light of the knowledge of God; wisdom pours out through them and into human minds so that they might know God;

Next, choir of “thrones” who bear God’s grace and deliver the ways of justice to earthly rulers.

Then come the dominions, the angels who instruct earthly authorities, work miracles, and protect from evil thoughts and demons.

Then the principalities, (who teach people to honor God, and spread God’s ways); and the messenger archangels (like Michael and Gabriel, whom we hear of a bit more in the Protestant churches, and then the just plain angels, including guardian angels who never abandon us, and are always prepared to help us. I find all this fascinating, speculative, and easy to get unnecessarily caught up in. But I was curious about something: I asked Carolyn which of the

hierarchy of angels the shepherds heard on the hillside that night.

With my Protestant Biblical training and her engagement in Orthodox mystical spirituality we provisionally concluded that they must have been the seraphim, cherubim and thrones --those closest to God who both toward God in praise. (Glory to God in the highest!) and toward humanity in service (peace on earth). With the angels, let us sing...

Sing Gloria

We don't know what Luke's understand of angelology might have been, but we can look to the Hebrew scriptures to help us know his context for introducing angels into the story.

God's angels accompany epiphanies, that is, God coming to earth, the revealing of God's glory and light. In Exodus we can read of God's angel in a burning bush, similarly God's presence in a pillar of cloud by

day and a pillar of fire by night; God's thunder and lightening marked God's descent in glory on Mt. Sinai.

Isaiah had a vision of God, sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their face, and with two they covered their feet and with two they flew. One called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory!" These are fierce and formidable, not like the angels you have on your Christmas tree.

Ezekiel had a vision of heaven: a cloud of fiery brightness, within it, human like figures (angels) with four faces, (a human, a lion, an ox and an eagle and two wings, under each wing...human hands.)

In the Psalm 18, a rescuing God comes through thunder and lightning riding on a cherub, swiftly on the wings of the wind. Through the darkness, God in luminous brightness breaks through the

darkness and reaches down to draw the psalmist out of his mighty waters and strong enemies.

So, when Luke needs to communicate to early Jesus-followers the magnitude of this birth, that this child is their God entering the material realm from the mystical realm, he places the story in a context which communicates that reality-- angels revealing God's glory seen and heard by humankind.

Sing Gloria

I've focused up to now on the ones praising, singing, the angels. What of the people hearing those glorias? Shepherds. With what is often the sentimentality of the 23rd psalm in our hearts, it's easy to forget that shepherds were not a respected class in the 1st century. Their proximity to animal waste and blood, to sickness and death of animals and the round-the-clock requirements of their trade made it near impossible to fulfill the demands of the law. Shepherds were the

lowest of the low. When you place an angel and shepherds in your nativity set or crèche, you are participating in a radical act. Shepherds and angels should repel one another, not join together. But on the night of Jesus' birth, the highest of the high created beings...

remember those seraphim and cherubim... make themselves and the radiant brightness of God known to the lowest of the low creatures.

This was not something these uneducated scruffy, unholy folk could have imagined ever happening to them. That the heavens could break open to reveal the glory of God: that would be fearful for anyone. For a priest, or a particularly pious practicing Jew perhaps more believable—that's what they came to expect in the Temple. But for shepherds? I wouldn't be surprised if they wondered if those berries they found just in time for lunch weren't hallucinogenic. The glory of God come to shepherds? It had never occurred to them that God would come to nobodies like them. A strict boundary, a social taboo

in ancient Judaism is breached: Heaven touches earth and earth is enveloped in heaven.

Gloria

Luke, as seasoned writer in his day, uses a literary technique English majors call the *inclusio* or “sandwiching”. Think of the outside of the oreo cookie. In his gospel, there are angels at the beginning and angels at the end.

Unlikely people, shepherds, are the first to be told by messenger (an angel) of the birth. Unlikely people, women, are the first to learn from two men in dazzling clothes, (angels!)that Christ is risen. At the beginning of his gospel Luke shows his readers that traffic can move both ways...from heaven, to earth, and back. At the end of his gospel, he illustrates the same; Jesus ascends, returning to the heavenly realm.

On the inside of those two wafers this theme develops: Jesus calling Fisher-folk, money launderers, sexual nonconformists, women. Jesus, God's Love in human form is "for" everyone, yes, even sinners.

A word about the second half of the song: on earth, peace among those whom God favors.

The angels' canticle is not only a declaration of praise, it is also a call to action—on God's part and by extension on ours. Hillary Roethlisberger's Advent Devotional yesterday said it so well: "Jesus was sent to wash the feet of the disciples. We are sent to humbly serve our brothers and sisters. Jesus was sent to give power to the powerless. We are sent to empower the voiceless. Jesus was sent to mend the brokenhearted. We are sent to mend the broken-hearted. As Jesus was sent into the world, so Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit sends us into the world." Jesus came with

the angelic, godly claim of peace for the world, so we are sent to find, celebrate, and participate in that peace where we find it.

At Christmas, with the joining of heaven and earth, we are able, and are invited, to join the choir of angels giving praise, but not just praising... also and promoting wholeness and peace.

There is an old legend that years after that birth announcement was given to those shepherds, some of the older shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside were trying to remember how the song that the angels sang went on that night when they were keeping watch over their flocks. They tried again and again to recall the words and the tune. As they struggled for recall, they heard a lamb bleating in the distance. Another one had gone astray. They each looked at each other to see which would leave the warmth of the fire to go into the cold, dark night to rescue the lost sheep. Finally, a young boy who would have not even been born on the night of Christ's birth got up

from the campfire and went out in the dark of the night to find the lost sheep. Finding the lamb, he lifted it onto his shoulders and brought it back to the fold. As the young boy drew near to the campfire and his older companions, they noticed he was humming, humming a tune he had learned from his father who said that he had heard it one night while keeping watch over his flocks by night. It was the tune to the song that the angels had sung on that first Christmas night.

Let's sing it again, be sure it's ingrained in our hearts and souls so that we can teach it to our children.

Sing Gloria

